

CRS Report for Congress

The Bush Administration's Proposal For ICBM Modernization, SDI, and the B-2 Bomber

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THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S PROPOSAL FOR ICBM MODERNIZATION, SDI, AND THE B-2 BOMBER

SUMMARY

President Bush's FY90 defense budget proposes that the United States proceed to deploy a force of mobile ICBMs, starting with the deployment of 50 MX (presently based in silos) on railroad trains. The President also proposes to continue development of a single-warhead Midgetman for deployment on trucks. In addition to these developments, the budget appears to slow deployment of a first phase of a ballistic missile defense system and shifts emphasis to the "Brilliant Pebbles" concept. Finally, the Bush budget would delay deployment of the B-2 "Stealth" bomber by at least a year. This report describes the budgetary, military, and arms control implications of these proposals.

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THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S PROPOSAL FOR ICBM MODERNIZATION, SDI, AND THE B-2 BOMBER

The Bush Administration's FY90 defense budget makes several key proposals with respect to mobile ICBMs, SDI, and the B-2 bomber. This report describes the budgetary, military, and arms control implications of these proposals.

PROPOSALS FOR STRATEGIC PROGRAMS

MX: Develop rail-garrison basing for the 50 missiles now deployed in silos, with planned initial operational capability (IOC, the date when the first units of a system are operationally deployed) scheduled for 1992.

Midgetman: Develop a single-warhead missile and a road-mobile basing mode for it, with a view toward deploying 250 to 500 missiles beginning in 1997.

SDI: Pursue aggressively the "Brilliant Pebbles" concept, which might use ~~tens of~~ thousands of small space-based homing rockets, for the Phase I Strategic Defense System.

B-2: Slow production by at least a year.

BUDGETARY ASPECTS

Rail-garrison MX: The budget requests \$1.1 billion for FY90 and \$2.1 billion for FY91. Because the missiles are already built, the Air Force estimates that the acquisition costs of redeploying them in the rail-garrison basing mode will be modest compared to other strategic programs: \$5.9 billion for FY90 through completion. The Administration will request funding to complete the program over the next few years, and will hold back Midgetman to make funds available for rail MX.

Midgetman: For this program, the Administration plans to request \$1.2 billion in total from FY90 through FY94. Secretary Cheney noted that this is "not the most efficient spending profile on the program. It is budget driven, especially in the early years." But it keeps Midgetman alive, permitting a few flight tests and development of some components until the bulk of rail MX funding is spent. The plan to hold Midgetman at low funding levels through FY94 and to attain IOC in 1997 means that the program will entail

expenditures of several billion dollars a year beginning in FY95. To ensure that the program continues, Chairman Aspin has said he will try to increase the near term funding for Midgetman or tie MX deployment to progress on Midgetman.

SDI: The Administration has requested sizable reductions in the SDI program compared to the Reagan request: \$991 million less in FY90, \$1,271 million less in FY91, for a total of \$7 billion less for FY90-FY94. As Secretary Cheney noted, SDI has "got to fit into a reduced budget." The \$33 billion that the Administration plans to request for this five-year period includes perhaps \$10-\$15 billion of the \$69 billion estimated total cost of a Phase I Strategic Defense System.

B-2: The Administration proposes large cuts, \$855 million in FY90 and \$3,226 million in FY91, which it obtains by delaying production a year. Secretary Cheney expressed concern over the program's cost and its technical feasibility.

Future budgets: The Administration has delayed the period of peak funding for Midgetman, SDI, and B-2. During their peak funding years, each will require expenditures of several billion dollars a year. But the combined costs might be so great that one or all of the programs might have to be delayed again.

MILITARY ASPECTS

The Bush revision alters the composition and scheduled deployment of new U.S. strategic forces, as compared with the Reagan plan.

ICBMs: The Bush plan would result in three basing modes for U.S. ICBMs: silo basing for the older Minuteman II and III missiles; rail-mobile basing for the MX; and road-mobile basing for the Midgetman. This combination of basing modes and missiles would be expected to provide the survivability and flexibility needed for ICBMs to accomplish a range of missions.

Silo-based Minuteman missiles could not survive a Soviet first strike, but they could be launched against time-urgent targets before being struck at the outset of a nuclear war. The rail-garrison MX could survive if the United States received advance warning of a Soviet attack and dispersed the trains on that warning. However, the MX would not have to survive for long to accomplish its primary military mission. The MX missile's combination of accuracy and ten warheads makes it ideal for attacking clusters of fixed hardened targets, such as Soviet ICBM silos. The United States would want to destroy these targets early in a conflict, possibly to disrupt a Soviet attack in progress. Consequently, the United States might still launch the MX missiles early, even if the trains had dispersed and the missiles could survive until later in the conflict. The road-mobile Midgetman could survive for

hours or days after the start of a conflict if it had dispersed on warning that a Soviet attack had begun. The Midgetman could attack hardened, fixed targets at the outset of a nuclear war, but it also could be held in reserve to attack isolated targets that appeared later in the conflict.

Mix of ICBM and SLBM warheads: The FY90 defense budget moves toward establishing a mix of modern mobile ICBMs and older silo-based Minuteman ICBMs. It also maintains the pace of the ballistic missile submarine program, with continued funding for the Trident II missile and funding of long-leadtime items for the 19th Trident.

Congress and the Administration must decide how to allocate warheads between ICBMs and SLBMs within the ballistic missile warhead limit -- 4,900 -- that would be set by START. In making this decision, Congress might consider questions such as the following. (1) Should the current ratio of ICBM to SLBM warheads be maintained under START? (2) The Air Force would like to see the ratio tilted in its favor. Given the improvement in ICBM survivability caused by mobility, would it make sense to have more ICBMs and fewer SLBMs? (3) Within the ICBM force, would it be preferable to modify existing Minuteman missiles deployed between 1965 and 1975, as the Air Force is considering, or to forgo this modification, or to replace Minutemen with new ICBMs? (3) The Navy wants the ICBM-SLBM ratio tilted toward SLBMs. Can SLBM warheads substitute for ICBM warheads? In particular, would it be preferable to buy more Tridents and retire Minuteman missiles? (4) Under the Bush Administration's plan, all SLBM warheads and many ICBM warheads will have high lethality against Soviet ICBM silos. Does the United States need so many counterforce warheads, or should it retain more Minuteman missiles, buy or retain more bombers, or deploy fewer weapons than START permits?

SDI: The President's plan to reduce SDI funding by 18 percent over the next five years may well slow the deployment of the first phase of the strategic defense system. This delay might be acceptable, however, because the inherent survivability of mobile ICBMs would weaken part of the rationale for the deployment of near-term defenses. The Phase I Strategic Defense System is designed in part to enhance deterrence in part by complicating a Soviet attack on U.S. land-based forces; mobile ICBMs would do the same thing. Because Midgetman can disperse in minutes over a large area, it does not require defenses to survive a massive Soviet attack. If rail MX dispersed before an attack, it would also be highly survivable without defenses. ←

B-2: The Air Force has developed the B-2 bomber to maintain its ability to penetrate Soviet airspace into the next century. The B-2 could penetrate at high altitudes, with its low observability, so it could scan wide areas of terrain. This wide field of view might be of particular value for locating and attacking Soviet mobile targets, primarily ICBMs. The U.S. decision to develop its own mobile ICBMs means that the United States will probably withdraw its START proposal to ban all these missiles. As the Soviet Union

However, only
SDS can provide
A defense. SDS
can intercept
mobile missiles,
including
SLBMs.

retains its SS-24 and SS-25 mobile ICBMs, the B-2 will retain its military utility as a means of attacking them.

ARMS CONTROL ASPECTS

The budget proposal is consistent with U.S. pursuit of a START treaty.

The United States will have at least one type of mobile ICBM. This appears likely to be a prerequisite for START. The Soviets invested heavily to deploy two types of mobile ICBMs, and insist that they will not agree to a START treaty that bans mobile ICBMs, as the United States has proposed. At the same time, the Senate appears unlikely to agree to a START treaty under which the Soviet Union deploys mobile ICBMs while the United States does not.

Consistent with the plan to deploy mobile ICBMs, the Administration is expected to drop the U.S. proposal to ban these missiles and pursue agreement with the Soviet Union on some plan to verify compliance with limits on them.

The Soviet Union has proposed that a START treat the cease Strategic Defense System to be in force if either party violates the ABM Treaty. Deployment of Phase I would violate the ABM Treaty, as would certain kinds of tests in anticipation of deployment. The budget proposal implies that the United States will restrain SDI testing, keeping it in R&D and putting off a decision to proceed toward deployment of Phase I SDS, thus delaying a potential roadblock to START.

The pursuit of advanced strategic offensive forces and the reining in of strategic defenses indicate that the United States will continue the offense-dominant approach to security rather than shifting to a defense-dominant one.

The Bush revision continues the Trident program and does not address the ultimate number of Tridents to buy. Under START, each side would have 4,900 ballistic missile warheads. The mix of U.S. ICBM and SLBM warheads that most closely replicates the current mix is 1,444 on ICBMs and 3,456 on SLBMs. Eighteen Tridents, each armed with 24 8-warhead Trident II missiles, carry 3,456 warheads. Yet FY90 funding is requested for long-leadtime items for the 19th Trident.

CONCLUSION

A previous CRS report¹ indicates that Congress and the Administration face many choices on strategic policy, but that there are only a few clusters of consistent choices on ICBM modernization, START, and SDI. That report noted three such clusters. (1) A START path, involving deployment of mobile ICBMs, a deemphasis of SDI R&D, and pursuit of START. (2) A Phase I deployment path, involving deployment of a large-scale Strategic Defense System, forgoing START, and keeping ICBMs in silos. (3) A START/SDI R&D path, involving the deployment of mobile ICBMs and pursuit of START while engaging in as much SDI development as possible within the bounds of the ABM Treaty.

The decisions outlined in the proposed FY90 budget indicate that the Administration is presently following the START/SDI R&D path. The commitment to mobile ICBMs and the reduction of SDI funding may well signal the demise of the Phase I deployment path. Equally, the proposed Bush plan to spend \$33 billion on SDI R&D over the next five years and to pursue Brilliant Pebbles is inconsistent with the START path.

The START/SDI R&D path is an interim path, pending resolution of START negotiability and SDI technical feasibility. In a year or two, it should become apparent whether the United States and Soviet Union will agree to a START treaty. If the United States chooses to ratify START, it would presumably have to drop plans to deploy a large-scale strategic defense during the treaty's term, and might well reduce SDI R&D funding. During the same period, the United States will have to decide whether or not to deploy SDI. If the United States chooses to deploy a large-scale defense, it would presumably have to drop plans to continue with START. Short-term developments on START and SDI thus become critical to the choice between them. Budgetary pressure and Soviet negotiating flexibility would work on behalf of START; technical progress on defenses would work on behalf of SDI.

¹U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. Strategic Policy at a Crossroads: Critical Choices and Policy Dilemmas Facing the United States Today. CRS Report 89-210 F, by Steven Hildreth, Jonathan Medalia, and Amy Woolf. March 30, 1989: 38 p.